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Teaching our Homeless Children

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Abstract:

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This paper discusses some of the major concerns associated with the instructional process of our homeless children. The reader is provided with a brief overview of the prevalence of this population. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness the number of school children who are homeless is growing rapidly with 1.4 to 1.5 million children out of 3.5 million homeless people (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). This is followed with a brief listing of characteristics of homeless children. The author presents some ideas on how do our educational communities teach homeless children and provide them with tools to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness? How can administrators support their staff's effort in providing an engaging instructional setting while meeting the unique needs of our students?

Teaching our Homeless Children

Educational activities exist in an extremely dynamic environment. Within this environment our educational leaders are interacting in an atmosphere which presents new challenges related to the requirements mandated by Federal, State and local regulation. Additionally substantial budget reductions are being implemented across our educational landscape. Principals and teachers in particular are tasked with educating our children in these demanding surroundings. Teachers are tasked to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of all the students including a growing population classified as homeless.

Homeless student populations in our school is growing and it does not appear to showing signs of abating. Our school staffs must essentially prepare themselves to meet the unique physical, emotional and academic needs our homeless students. We must walk up the steps of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs with our homeless children. A hungry child, a child who does not know where they might sleep could be extremely difficult to teach on a high and/or engaging level. District homeless coordinators can help teachers in meeting these physical needs. Students emotional needs can be met by a kind, caring and loving teacher who present a stable and predictable environment for our students to learn. It takes a village to raise a child and for some homeless students it might require the entire district.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness the number of school children who are homeless is growing rapidly with 1.4 to 1.5 million children out of 3.5 million homeless people (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). The web site www.homelesschildrenofAmerica.org reports that 5.2 % of homeless persons in the United States are children with 16% of homeless children living in poverty. 1 in 20 children in the State of Texas do not know where they will get their next meal. A breakdown by educational level shows numbers decrease as their age increases. Table 2 displays the ethnic breakdown of homeless children.

Below are two tables showing the demographic breakdown of Texas homeless children.

Table 1. Number of homeless children per grade level.

Under 6 years of age	141,584	
Grades K-8	164,086	
9-12	31,435	Graduation Rate <25%
Total	337,105	

Table 2. Ethnic breakdown of homeless children in Texas.

White	40%
African American	13%
Hispanic	46%

www.homelesschildrenamerica.org

There has been a considerable amount written on the characteristics of homeless students. Below is a review of a few common characteristics of homeless children. This is only reminder to educators concerning issues associated with the educational process of these children.

- These children are the victims of economic hardships, evictions and/or many types of abuse. These children are in any classroom, any row, any chair or table. Younger children will be more open concerning their situation, but for upper elementary and beyond the stigma may be harsh therefore they are considerably less open and forthcoming with regards to their living arrangements (Dill, 2010).

- Homeless population with the accompanying degree of mobility is on the rise in the United States. This cycle of movement which entails instability and high absenteeism in school has a ripple effect in the educational process of homeless children. These characteristics have placed this population at-risk with regards to learning and literacy success (Bartlett, 1997)

- Generally speaking, homeless student's parents lack successful completion of high school and are unmarried females who are the head of the households on some type of public assistance (Nunez, 2004).

The pressing question is how do our educational communities teach homeless children and provide them with tools to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness? How can administrators support their staff's effort in providing an engaging instructional setting while meeting the unique needs of our students?

The initial step is the establishment of a school climate in which all students feel safe secure and cared about. To this end, schools must become homeless student's safe haven. This sense of security involves the entire staff having the mindset that "this is school and school is safe". School staffs should work to create a friendly, kind and supportive school climate in all areas. School staffs must have meaningful interaction with our students to create this climate.

The education of this dynamic population in our schools has made the educational process a team sport. Teachers of a homeless child must recognize that these children come from a "highly mobile and needy population" (Sinatra, 2007p.8). Many of these "at-risk" students may be doing poorly in many areas of the schooling process which requires a team response intervention in fulfilling a student's achievement potential. Teachers should cultivate relationships with professionals who can assist them in this endeavor. Teachers must not hesitate in seeking assistance or support from administrators, counselors, district staff or other professionals.

Administrators ought to be proactive in giving as much support as possible to their teachers. This support process might begin with asking teachers if they are doing ok or do they need anything, but it can't and shouldn't end with the initial question. We need to run the gamete of support including in-service trainings, additional resources and emotional support. This support process will be ineffective if the student's needs are not properly matched up with support options.

The nature of support must be proactive with the intervention being aggressive in nature. Homeless students present a complex and a unique set of problems, concerns and academic conditions. Our interventions must mirror this uniqueness to meet the myriad of situational and academic problems and should be forward leaning and practical. Educators must realize an appropriated response to these student's needs may entail the creation or unique blend of resources or programs.

One of our main interventions concerns student's absenteeism and mobility. Sinatra noted that his summer cohort program incurred limitations due to the lack of regular and sustained attendance which inhibits the instruction and measurement of goals (Sinatra, 2007). If a homeless child in not in school, the school can't wait days before inquires are made concerning these absences. Upon a child being absent from school, the teacher or school staff should contact the parent or make a home visit promptly. If appropriate, staff might be dispatched to the house to bring the child to school. This type of action requires prior planning and the administration creating a system to ensure our school staff is safe and protected while transporting students safely to school. You can't teach a child who is not at school, therefore attendance issues must be addressed immediately.

Our homeless students have an extreme rate of mobility. The interventions to address this issue center on the area of transportation and home school concept. Many districts provide special transportation for their homeless students. This service enables students to attend their home campus, even in the event of families moving to different

attendance zones. By remaining in the same school, students and teachers are able to build a stronger relationship of trust that will allow worthwhile meaningful learning to occur.

Once in school, Teachers and staff should publically approach these students similar to other students so as not to showcase the student's situation or cause embarrassment. Privately homeless student's situation necessitates a larger degree of empathy. Students may act out or have behavior concerns caused by a chaotic living situational. Projects or assignments may involve modification due to a lack of parental and/economic support or resources. Teacher interactions should be conducted in a kind, caring and instructional manner.

Teachers and staff must approach these children situations similar to that of an exceptional child. Homeless children are both special and incredible unique gifts to teachers. To protect these students, they deserve to be treated with similar mechanisms established to safeguard our special education students. This involves confidential, individual instructional programs and unique instructional methods. Our goal is no undo embarrassment towards the student which might preclude them from achieving their potential.

The main purpose or technical core of schools is the instructional process of educating our children. Therefore, our main concern centers upon the best instructional method or methodologies we can deliver to meet the unique needs of these learners. Studies have investigated the use of cognitive mapping strategies with low income children located in inner city environments. These studies have shown positive results for improvement in reading and writing (Guastell, Beasley, & Sinatra, 2000). According to Sinatra, the benefits of small group classroom instruction and computer lab settings monitored by "trained and caring teachers" will have a positive impact on homeless children (Sinatra, 2007).

During class discussions homeless students bring extremely unique experiences to the classroom. These children have had experiences vastly different from those of "normal" children. Many have witnessed events small children shouldn't see nor partake in. This "uniqueness of experience" is an area teachers can employ to an advantage in classroom discussions. Students can relate feeling, emotions and experiences which could move class discussions in ways unforeseen. Teachers ought to proceed with a degree of caution, knowing some children may need instruction in both what topics are appropriate to discuss and how to appropriately talk about some of the more delicate topics.

Staffs should create an instructional plan for all at-risk students including homeless students. This entails conducting formal and informal formative assessments to identify deficient academic areas. The emphasis is for the assessment to be accurate and conducted in a timely manner. This highly mobile population might move before a good intervention can be implemented and educational goals established. With this in mind, speed is essential. Our purpose is to identify holes in student's learning, how deep or large these academic gaps are and to identify if a minor intervention or a major or significant intervention is required. This plan is not limited to the child's everyday instruction but is included in tutoring sessions or small group instructional times. We must not forget to utilize all available campus programs knowing we may need to create a unique program to meet a unique need of a child.

The instructional methods most teachers naturally and immediately migrate to is a scaffolding strategy. One major concern is the establishing of a good or firm base to erect the scaffold upon. Student's with a poor base, scaffolding strategies will not be as effective as the student's potential might warrant. Students lacking a good base require teachers and staff to establish one. Teachers must ascertain the ability levels of their students on a daily basis utilizing an ongoing assessment process or system. Using this process, teachers must anchor a child's learning in both reading and math.

Math anchors for early elementary students are associated with basic facts. For older math students, a continuation of daily instruction in basic math is a necessity. Just as for their younger peers, this daily instruction in basic math includes basic facts, including adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. As our older students develop and mature mathematically their basic math facts will develop on a parallel track. Students will use the basic operation to manipulate fractions, integers, irrational numbers, squaring numbers, tri-nominal and an examination of number relationships including prime numbers.

Reading has its own and separate anchors and is probably the most important academic area for our children. "Reading is essential to success in our society. The ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement (Snow, 1998, p.1). Outside of individual academic reading instruction, the primary reason of literacy instruction is to instill a love a reading in our students.

Early elementary children reading anchors include phonics, common sight words, vocabulary development and fluency. These are the most important and common anchors, but not an exclusive list. An emphasis on vocabulary development, reading different genres and the celebration of literacy every time reading instructions

occurs is extremely important. The important aspect of reading instruction is that reading instruction is a celebration of literacy. Children, who are not reading on grade level by the end of third grade, have a higher probability of dropping out of high school (Snow, 1998).

For older reading students, schools must continue the celebration of literacy. The older homeless students will continue to require academic reading supports and literacy mentors. Homeless students may require guidance toward certain pieces of literature for a number of reasons.

All our students may need guidance in the selection of literary works. Benefits of this assistance include increasing reading levels, vocabulary expansion and the production of well rounded and well educated citizens. The importance of expanding student's vocabulary can't be overstated. Vocabulary instruction is a major avenue of academic improvement, but more importantly a solid vocabulary will enhance the probability of entrance and successful completion of higher educational pursuits.

Academically we must pursue or establish a dual instructional track. The first track is an "on grade level" instructional track. As students are assessed utilizing an "on grade level" assessment instrument, during a portion of their instruction they have to receive grade level instruction in core academic areas even if they are **not** "on grade level". The second track might include a differentiated instructional model of small group instructional activities or settings. During this differentiated small group instructional time, students are taught on their own established academic level. Our team will begin where the students are and instructionally move to where they should be; on or above grade level or as far as their potential can take them. Very intense, on target and data driven instruction can produce massive academic gains for our students.

Teachers are extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to teach a homeless child. These children are the type of child most teachers entered education to teach. The tremendous effort to teach at-risk children requires a complex degree of teamwork to accomplish. Team efforts involve teachers, parents, administrators, district staff members and outside agencies. The incredible team effort will provide the hard working and caring teacher the needed support to help our homeless students achieve greatness. Saving a homeless child is a reward which is priceless for a teacher. Are you up to the challenge to do what it takes to provide the required effort to truly educate these students?

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